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Vladimir Sakharov, democracy and the Moscow Elite

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AFTER A DECADE as an American, Dr. Vladimir Sakharov still seems as Russian as a Chekov short story. He's a tall, lumbering, blue-eyed man prone to wry understatement and talking about his life as a former Soviet diplomat, CIA informer and, perhaps most important, a member of the Moscow Elite, that small privileged class of intelligence officers, Party officials and top professionals who rule the U.S.S.R.

Sakharov often speaks to corporations and political clubs on topics ranging from Soviet plans for the Middle East to particular methods of Soviet intelligence training. But he is especially good at telling tales about his old peer group, the Moscow Elite. His 1980 book "High Treason," a highly readable account of his childhood and his career as a diplomat/agent, is perhaps most fascinating in its accounts of the Soviet Baby Boom children he grew up with.

From descriptions in his book, the Moscow Elite sounds as tough to penetrate as the British monarchy. One is born into it. One marries in it. And one doesn't stray from it.

"We used to have a system where if a Moscow girl was living with a black student, they would label her parasite, shave her head and send her 100 kilometers outside the Moscow limits," Sakharov says. "In the Soviet Union, you stick to your own kind."

The children of the Moscow Elite quickly accustom themselves to leading double lives. At school, they recite the Party line of egalitarianism. At home, they put on Western jeans and host wild parties stocked with forbidden supplies of rock music, cigarettes and scotch.

It's an existence built on ironies. The more powerful your job with the secret police, for example, the more the government spies on you. The school system rewards snitchers more handsomely than scholars—a merit system mirrored by the entire society.

Sakharov was the sort of teen-ager who turned in a brilliant essay on Tolstoy and went home to read J.D. Salinger. He organized a student orchestra to perform patriotic music but devoted the practice sessions to American jazz.

"It was a childhood full of contradictions to which I adapted by learning that nothing was as it seemed and the way to survive was to be able to play many roles convincingly," Sakharov writes in "High Treason."

In fact, he found that one of the toughest things about becoming an American was learning to believe that things were as they seemed.

"There is a saying about the Russian character, that it is a very conspiratorial, secret kind of thing. The Russians think the CIA is not the CIA. They think it's only a front, that the real CIA is hidden somewhere behind it. They think there's a secret room in the White House where the real decision-making goes on.

"Soviet diplomats who come here have no idea what America's about. They stay in their own little cliques—a society within a society. They have never had any experience with democracy. They don't understand. They're afraid of it. It's totally insecure for them to even think in democratic ways."

In a few decades, Sakharov says that the small, inbred group that rules the Soviet Union will face difficulties trying to control a nation whose major population groups are non-Russian. The situation he predicts comes uncannily close to the political conditions that existed in Russia before 1916.

"My concern is that Stalinism is coming back," he says. "These young people I grew up with are looking back with some kind of nostalgia at the era of Stalin's purges. They are too young to remember what it was like. They're saying he did the right things. There's a feeling of growing Russian chauvinism, a feeling that the Russian nation is dying out. They're saying we need someone like Stalin."

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